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# Forum

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LAEL MORGAN

## The Far North/ South Pacific connection

ALASKA was represented on a panel on 'Culture, Tradition and the News Media' during the 1996 Pacific Islands News Association meeting in Tonga because indigenous minorities have much in common the world over. However, differences between Alaska Natives\* and those indigenous to the Island nations in their approach to mutual problems and in their use of varying media strategies are so marked, that a comparison might prove useful for later problem solving in both hemispheres.

Like the South Pacific, Alaska is peopled by widely diversified cultures and racial types, some capitalistic, some socialist, with five totally different languages and lifestyles. Missionaries invaded both hemispheres, but they arrived late in much

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\*Alaskans use the word Native (with a capital 'N') to refer to their indigenous people. Whites born in Alaska are referred to as native with a small 'n'.

of Alaska and rather than 'warring for souls' as they did too frequently in the south, rival churches formally 'divided up' Alaska, with the Baptists getting the central coast, the Methodists going to the Aleutians, the Episcopal working the Yukon and Lower Arctic coasts and so on.

Most Pacific kingdoms had little choice but to ally with foreign nations that invaded their shores. Alaskans, too, were forced to ally, first with the Russians who 'discovered' the territory and then with the United States when the Russian government 'sold' the territory to America during a tight budget period in 1867.

However, the Russian government carefully noted in its treaty of cession that it did not have the authority to negotiate for the aborigines of Alaska, and that it was up to the United States to deal with them at some later date.

For a century no one paid much attention to this disclaimer but in 1959 Alaska became a state and its officials began claiming land that Native people had used and occupied for centuries.

Unlike most Pacific Islanders and Indians elsewhere in the United States, Alaska Natives had never surrendered nor signed any treaties. And in the mid-1960s they began to fight for their

land entitlement. Few outsiders thought they would succeed, because the highly varied tribes had warred among themselves for centuries and had no way to communicate with one another. Nor would the mainstream press cover their issues which also included problems of health care (they had the highest infant mortality rate in the world — worse than India), substandard education and virtually no economic opportunity.

Yet they managed to unite, communicating through a small Native newspaper called the *Tundra Times*, which brought their problems to the attention of state and federal officials and the public at large. And in 1971 they won the biggest land claims settlement the modern world had ever heard of — B\$1 billion in cash and clear title to 40 million acres to be shared among 55,000 people.

Today the life span and infant mortality rates of Alaska Natives are almost on a par with the rest of the United States. Their educational opportunities are limitless, and some have better economic opportunities than many white settlers. Yet all is not well in the Far North. The suicide rate for young Native men is now seven times higher than the American average, and almost as bad for other age groups.

Alcoholism and fetal alcohol syndrome — seldom a worry before there was economic opportunity — have become major problems. The high school dropout rate is high, test scores are dropping, and many Native youth

seem rudderless. Compounding this problem is the fact that the same Native leaders and businessmen who came to power in part through the hard-hitting, honest, investigative reporting of their newspaper, the *Tundra Times*, are now just as anxious as the average white capitalist to keep reporters from looking into the management of Native affairs.

And because good reporting violates their traditional taboo against public 'finger pointing', few Native writers will consider going into the field of journalism. The majority still believe that only good news should be printed about Native people which means problems vital to them cannot be easily discussed.

Unfortunately, indigenous people in both hemispheres suffer from poor treatment at the hands of journalists who do not understand their cultures, and neither group has found a fool-proof way to indoctrinate newcomers.

Alaskans concerned with media recruitment are now in the midst of a concerted drive to recruit Native reporters who can better understand and report Native problems. But it is slow going, especially when results are contrasted to the high percentage of indigenous people working in and running the mainstream presses in the South Pacific, and the islanders' enthusiasm for both journalism and recruitment and training programs.

Yet Pacific Islands people might learn from Alaskans in their fight to gain political and economic clout

through careful (and honest) use of the media opportunities available to them. Further study and comparison could prove useful. Perhaps we can learn from each other's successes and mistakes.

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## **Richardson dies in Suva**

John Richardson, a former chief sub-editor of *The Review*, died of a heart attack in Suva in June 1996. A New Zealand permanent resident, Richardson worked at Associated Media Ltd from January to December 1995. He left to join the *Daily Post*.

Born in Yorkshire, England, Richardsom, 44, was a journalist for 25 years, starting as a reporter with the *Barnsley Chronicle* weekly newspaper in Yorkshire at the age of 16. Between 1972 and 1979, he worked for the *Western Daily Press*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Oxford Mail* and the *Evening Standard* newspaper in England. He also worked on the pictures desk of Associated Press in West Germany from 1979 to 1981, when he came to Fiji.

Richardson was chief sub-editor and later, chief-of-staff at the *Fiji Times* between 1981 to 1983. From 1983 to 1987, he was editor of *Islands Business* magazine. he left for New Zea-



**A Richardson photo.**

land in 1987 after the closure of the *Fiji Sun*, where he was training and editorial adviser. His last job in New Zealand before joining *The Review* was as a sub-editor of the *New Zealand Herald*.

With wide-ranging experience in all aspects of print journalism, Richardson held the positions of editor, chief subeditor, production editor, deputy finance editor and chief-of-staff during his career. He was also an experienced writer and photographer and magazine and newspaper designer.

Richardson wrote widely on Fiji and the South Pacific nations. He interviewed many of the leading figures in the Pacific and wrote about business, the environment and politics. he also spent five weeks in Lebanon,

## ALAN ROBSON

writing in-depth articles about the role of Fiji's troops in the Middle East.

Hardworking and creative, Richardson often worked long hours at *The Review* and liked to get involved in all aspects of magazine production. His sense of humour endeared him to all and made him a favourite, especially with the junior staff.

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### **Political correctness**

In an otherwise excellent review in *The Australian* of 17 March 1996, Kenneth Minogue says that to its supporters PC (political correctness) is just common sense and only attacked by paranoid conservatives'. Actually this isn't quite right.

'Political correctness' is a term people employ to describe actions and attitudes they don't like. When we tell someone they are 'politically correct' we are usually saying we think there is something suspect about their beliefs or activities.

The core of the anti-PC accusation is that PC attitudes are insincere. That they are being expressed because they are trendy and to win kudos rather than to express a deeply held moral belief.

More seriously, it may be felt that PC activities are power plays in moral dress.

This latter concern is reinforced by the proliferation of non-government organisations in most countries

over the last couple of decades, even in areas previously dominated by the state, like foreign aid. Considerable amounts of foreign aid are now, for better or worse, distributed through NGOs and private charities.

These charities have political, moral and religious agendas which are distributed alongside their food parcels. In spite of this, donor governments collaborate with them because the old system of state to state aid has been discredited by recipient country corruption and ineptitude. At the same time support for private aid programs conforms to politically ascendent ideas about the role of the state as supporter of private initiative.

The result is that private foreign aid has become big business, with a multitude of charities competing for public donations and government patronage. Support for these charities is popularly regarded as highly proper and correct.

But cynical PC critics wonder if the tears of concern at the plight of the poor are not aided by ideological manipulation and careerism. Similar power plays are often attributed to actors labelled PC by their critics.

The political correctness thrust into the developing world is seen by many indigenous elites as a threat. Frequent protests against 'Western style' democracy by Third World leaders like Malaysia's Mahatir, and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, represent a perception that Western-style democratisation will undercut the social ba-

sis of their political control. But they are also aware that there is an element of moral colonialism in much Western posturing on human rights issues and that from a structural point of view, complete democratisation will erode the individual character of Third World societies, already under pressure from the unbridled consumerism which has accompanied the growth in the size of the middle class.

In the West, some of the most controversial PC cases have arisen in universities over undeniable problems like sexual harassment. PC issues arise as university-based NGOs expand their criticism to include such a vast range of conduct that in many institutions any social interaction between staff and students is dangerous because it can lead to accusations of impropriety or victimisation.

Other activist groups join the lists in areas like ethnicity. Reasonable demands for balance and sensitivity are elaborated into wide-ranging demands in areas like curriculum control. The old liberal desiderata of the universities are under strong attack to conform to community views.

Outside the universities, a similar thrust to conformism in the name of liberation is apparent in many areas. Through a focus on victims, allied to appeals for government intervention on their behalf, NGOs often grease the way for the extension of the state into the home.

The distinction between the public and the private sphere, necessary to

liberal democracy, is increasingly undercut, not just in the West, but globally.

The creation of rafts of victims as a strategy for gaining influence and control by the politically correct, and the acceptance of this strategy by a credulous and prurient mass society, is a problem for democracy because it erodes the development of a community of independent thinkers.

A victim is a sort of half-person, not in control of his own destiny, who looks to the intervention of external forces for redress and who absolves himself from failure. It is now respectable to be a victim.

The problem with PC lies in its promotion of a culture of infantilism at variance both with the precepts of classical liberalism and with the requirements of a moral life.

Minogue suggests the result is 'an undifferentiated crowd, so classless, so little provided with any thoughtful sense of themselves, that they can be contemptuously manipulated in terms of mechanical identities such as colour or sexual preference'.

Here in Papua New Guinea popular mass democracy has not yet developed. Despite the efforts of some NGO groups, this probably means that political correctness will also have to wait its turn.

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## Questions or silence?

Papua New Guinea rates as one of the countries with the lowest literacy rate in the South Pacific, about 48 per cent. Here literacy is defined as the ability to read and write.

Most of those who don't have these skills rely to a greater extent on what they hear from others and what they see, and are so prone to a variation of interpretations.

From their audio sources, the information or meaning relayed would be subjective information after having gone through processes such as interpretation. In the information sciences it has been suggested by Kando that information concepts can be divided into three concept categories.

One category is subjective information. Examples of this concept by Belkin as 'the image structure of the recipient and the changes in the structure' and by Wersiq as 'effects of the recipients' indicates the meanings of some of the messages relayed to those being informed through audio sources.

As subjective information is recipient centered and depends on the intention and interest of the individual and the state of the knowledge of the individual, the meaning of the message relayed or information generated depends on the intention and interest if the information generator.

In assuming the interest of the majority of non-literate Papua New Guineans, and as far as public accountability is concerned, tertiary students are strategically placed as infor-

mation generators for the illiterate majority.

They have not yet been absorbed into systems of bias and, while in that 'sitting on the fence' position between the haves and *have nots*, they have access to objective information.

This concept of information is described as 'information recorded and stored and can be communicated beyond time'. What is important to those illiterate people is how the tertiary students interpret the objective information in the form of government policies. Also, authority is what the public wants to hear.

In the letters to the editor column of one of the daily newspapers earlier this year, this need to be informed when the readers spoke out in response to the regional member for New Ireland's comments to students. He told them 'to concentrate on their studies and leave politics alone' when they questioned how public funds were being disbursed and used in one of the Highlands provinces.

After all, it is part of their study to question, to learn the theories and apply them to practical situations. They were indeed being practical in questioning. It is a process of sustaining a sane community to question, otherwise silence can lead to social decline.

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